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The Breakdown

Written by B. A. Paris

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THE
BREAK
DOWN
B A PARIS



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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FRIDAY, JULY 17TH

The thunder starts as we're saying goodbye, leaving each other for the summer holidays ahead. A loud *crack!* echoes off the ground, making Connie jump. John laughs, the hot air dense around us.

'You need to hurry!' he shouts.

With a quick wave I run to my car. As I reach it, my mobile starts ringing, its sound muffled by my bag. From the ringtone I know that it's Matthew.

'I'm on my way,' I tell him, fumbling for the door handle in the dark. 'I'm just getting in the car.'

'Already?' His voice comes down the line. 'I thought you were going back to Connie's.'

'I was, but the thought of you waiting for me was too tempting,' I tease. The flat tone to his voice registers. 'Is everything all right?' I ask.

‘Yes, it’s just that I’ve got an awful migraine. It started about an hour ago and it’s getting steadily worse. That’s why I’m phoning. Do you mind if I go up to bed?’

I feel the air heavy on my skin and think of the storm looming; no rain has arrived yet but instinct tells me it won’t be far behind. ‘Of course not. Have you taken anything for it?’

‘Yes, but it doesn’t seem to be shifting. I thought I’d go and lie down in the spare room; that way, if I do fall asleep, you won’t disturb me when you come in.’

‘Good idea.’

‘I don’t really like going to bed without knowing you’re back safely.’

I smile at this. ‘I’ll be fine, it’ll only take me forty minutes. Unless I come back through the woods, by Blackwater Lane.’

‘Don’t you dare!’ I can almost sense a shaft of pain rocketing through his head at his raised tone. ‘Ouch, that hurt,’ he says, and I wince in sympathy. He lowers his voice to a more bearable level. ‘Cass, promise you won’t come back that way. First of all, I don’t want you driving through the woods on your own at night and, second, there’s a storm coming.’

‘OK, I won’t,’ I say hastily, folding myself onto the driver’s seat and dropping my bag onto the seat next to me.

‘Promise?’

‘Promise.’ I turn the key in the ignition and shift the car into gear, the phone now hot between my shoulder and ear.

'Drive carefully,' he cautions.

'I will. Love you.'

'Love you more.'

I put my phone in my bag, smiling at his insistence. As I manoeuvre out of the parking space, fat drops of rain splatter onto my windscreen. *Here it comes*, I think.

By the time I get to the dual carriageway, the rain is coming down hard. Stuck behind a huge lorry, my wipers are no match for the spray thrown up by its wheels. As I move out to pass it, lightning streaks across the sky and, falling back into a childhood habit, I begin a slow count in my head. The answering rumble of thunder comes when I get to four. Maybe I should have gone back to Connie's with the others, after all. I could have waited out the storm there, while John amused us with his jokes and stories. I feel a sudden stab of guilt at the look in his eyes when I'd said I wouldn't be joining them. It had been clumsy of me to mention Matthew. What I should have said was that I was tired, like Mary, our Head, had.

The rain becomes a torrent and the cars in the fast lane drop their speed accordingly. They converge around my little Mini and the sudden oppression makes me pull back into the slow lane. I lean forward in my seat, peering through the windscreen, wishing my wipers would work a little faster. A lorry thunders past, then another and when it cuts back into my lane without warning, causing me to brake sharply, it suddenly feels too dangerous to stay on this road. More lightning forks

the sky and in its wake the sign for Nook's Corner, the little hamlet where I live, looms into view. The black letters on the white background, caught in the headlights and glowing like a beacon in the dark, seem so inviting that, suddenly, at the very last minute, when it's almost too late, I veer off to the left, taking the short cut that Matthew didn't want me to take. A horn blares angrily behind me and as the sound chases me down the pitch-black lane into the woods, it feels like an omen.

Even with my headlights full on, I can barely see where I'm going and I instantly regret the brightly lit road I left behind. Although this road is beautiful by day – it cuts through bluebell woods – its hidden dips and bends will make it treacherous on a night like this. A knot of anxiety balls in my stomach at the thought of the journey ahead. But the house is only fifteen minutes away. If I keep my nerve, and not do anything rash, I'll soon be home. Still, I put my foot down a little.

A sudden rush of wind rips through the trees, buffeting my little car and, as I fight to keep it steady on the road, I hit a sudden dip. For a few scary seconds, the wheels leave the ground and my stomach lurches into my mouth, giving me that awful roller-coaster feeling. As it smacks back down onto the road, water whooshes up the side of the car and cascades onto the windscreen, momentarily blinding me.

'No!' I cry as the car judders to a halt in the pooling water. Fear of becoming stranded in the woods drives adrenalin through my veins, spurring me into action.

Shifting the car into gear with a crunch, I jam my foot down. The engine groans in protest but the car moves forward, ploughing through the water and up the other side of the dip. My heart, which has been keeping time with the wipers as they thud crazily back and forth across the windscreen, is pounding so hard that I need a few seconds to catch my breath. But I don't dare pull over in case the car refuses to start again. So I drive on, more carefully now.

A couple of minutes later, a sudden crack of thunder makes me jump so violently that my hands fly off the wheel. The car slews dangerously to the left and as I yank it back into position, my hands shaking now, I feel a rush of fear that I might not make it home in one piece. I try to calm myself but I feel under siege, not only from the elements but also from the trees as they writhe back and forth in a macabre dance, ready to pluck my little car from the road and toss it into the storm at any moment. With the rain drumming on the roof, the wind rattling the windows and the wipers thumping away, it's difficult to concentrate.

There are bends coming up ahead so I shift forward in my seat and grip the wheel tightly. The road is deserted and, as I negotiate one bend, and then the next, I pray I'll see some tail lights in front of me so that I can follow them the rest of the way through the woods. I want to phone Matthew, just to hear his voice, just to know I'm not the only one left in the world, because that's how it feels. But I don't want to wake him, not when he has

a migraine. Besides, he would be furious if he knew where I was.

Just when I think my journey is never going to end, I clear a bend and see the rear lights of a car a hundred yards or so in front of me. Giving a shaky sigh of relief, I speed up a little. Intent on catching it up, it's only when I'm almost on top of it that I realise it isn't moving at all, but parked awkwardly in a small lay-by. Caught unaware, I swerve out around it, missing the right-hand side of its bumper by inches and as I draw level, I turn and glare angrily at the driver, ready to yell at him for not putting on his warning lights. A woman looks back at me, her features blurred by the teeming rain.

Thinking that she's broken down, I pull in a little way in front of her and come to a stop, leaving the engine running. I feel sorry for her having to get out of her car in such awful conditions and, as I keep watch in my rear-view mirror – perversely glad that someone else has been foolish enough to cut through the woods in a storm – I imagine her scrambling around for an umbrella. It's a good ten seconds before I realise that she's not going to get out of her car and I can't help feeling irritated, because surely she's not expecting me to run back to her in the pouring rain? Unless there's a reason why she can't leave her car – in which case, wouldn't she flash her lights or sound her horn to tell me she needs help? But nothing happens so I start unbuckling my seat belt, my eyes still fixed on the rear-view mirror. Although I can't see her clearly, there's something off

about the way she's just sitting there with her headlights on, and the stories that Rachel used to tell me when we were young flood my mind: about people who stop for someone who's broken down, only to find there's an accomplice waiting to steal their car, of drivers who leave their cars to help an injured deer lying in the road only to be brutally attacked and find that the whole thing was staged. I do my seat belt back up quickly. I hadn't seen anyone else in the car as I'd driven past but that doesn't mean they're not there, hiding in the back seat, ready to leap out.

Another bolt of lightning shoots through the sky and disappears into the woods. The wind whips up and branches scabble at the passenger window, like someone trying to get in. A shiver runs down my spine. I feel so vulnerable that I release the handbrake and move the car forward a little to make it look as if I'm going to drive off, hoping it will provoke the woman into doing something – anything – to tell me that she doesn't want me to leave. But still there is nothing. Reluctantly, I pull to a stop again, because it doesn't seem right to drive off and leave her. But neither do I want to put myself at risk. When I think about it, she hadn't seemed distressed when I'd driven past, she hadn't waved frantically or given any indication that she needed help, so maybe somebody – her husband or one of the breakdown services – is already on their way. If I broke down, Matthew would be my first port of call, not a stranger in a car.

As I sit there, dithering, the rain picks up speed, drumming urgently on the roof – *Go, go, go!* It makes my mind up for me. Releasing the brake, I drive off as slowly as I can, giving her one last chance to call me back. But she doesn't.

A couple of minutes later, I'm out of the woods and heading towards home, a beautiful old cottage with climbing roses over the front door and a rambling garden at the back. My phone beeps, telling me that the phone signal has kicked in. A mile or so further down the road, I turn into our drive and park as close to the house as possible, glad that I'm home safe and sound. The woman in the car is still on my mind and I wonder about phoning the local police station or the breakdown services to tell them about her. Remembering the message that came through as I drove out of the woods, I take my phone from my bag and look at the screen. The text is from Rachel:

Hi, hope you had fun tonight! Off to bed now as had to go straight to work from the airport so feeling v jet-lagged. Just wanted to check you got the gift for Susie? I'll call you tomorrow morning xx

As I get to the end I find myself frowning – why was Rachel checking to see if I'd bought Susie a present? I hadn't, not yet, because with the run-up to the end of the school year I'd been too busy. Anyway, the party isn't until tomorrow evening and I'd been planning to

go shopping in the morning to buy her something. I read the message again and, this time, the words ‘the gift’ rather than ‘a gift’ jump out at me, because it sounds as if Rachel is expecting me to have bought something from the two of us.

I think back to the last time I saw her. It had been about two weeks ago, the day before she’d left for New York. She’s a consultant in the UK division of a huge American consultancy firm, Finchlakers, and often goes to the US on business. That evening, we’d gone to the cinema together and then on for a drink. Maybe that was when she’d asked me to get something for Susie. I rack my brains, trying to remember, trying to guess what we might have decided to buy. It could be anything – perfume, jewellery, a book – but nothing rings a bell. Had I forgotten? Memories of Mum, uncomfortable ones, flood my mind and I push them away quickly. *It isn’t the same*, I tell myself fiercely, *I am not the same. By tomorrow, I’ll have remembered.*

I stuff my phone back in my bag. Matthew’s right, I need a break. If I could just relax for a couple of weeks on a beach, I’d be fine. And Matthew needs a break too. We hadn’t had a honeymoon because we’d been busy renovating our cottage so the last time I’d had a proper holiday, the sort where you do nothing all day but lie on a beach and soak up the sun, was before Dad died, eighteen years ago. After, money had been too tight to do anything much, especially when I’d had to give up my job as a teacher to care for Mum. It was why,

when I discovered shortly after she died, that rather than being a penniless widow, she was in fact wealthy, I was devastated. I couldn't understand why she'd been content to live with so little when she could have lived in luxury. I was so shocked I'd barely heard what the solicitor was saying, so that by the time I managed to grasp how much money there was I could only stare at him in disbelief. I'd thought my father had left us with nothing.

A crack of thunder, further away now, brings me sharply back to the present. I peer through the window, wondering if I can make it out of the car and under the porch without getting wet. Clutching my handbag to my chest, I open the door and make a dash for it, the key ready in my hand.

In the hall, I kick off my shoes and tiptoe upstairs. The door to the spare bedroom is closed and I'm tempted to open it just an inch to see if Matthew is asleep. But I don't want to risk waking him so instead I quickly get ready for bed, and before my head even touches the pillow, I'm asleep.

SATURDAY, JULY 18TH

I wake the next morning to find Matthew sitting on the edge of the bed, a mug of tea in his hand.

‘What time is it?’ I murmur, struggling to open my eyes against the sunshine streaming in through the window.

‘Nine o’clock. I’ve been up since seven.’

‘How’s the migraine?’

‘Gone.’ In the sunlight his sandy hair looks golden and I reach up and run my hands through it, loving its thickness.

‘Is that for me?’ I ask, eyeing the mug hopefully.

‘Of course.’

I wriggle into a sitting position and sink my head back against the pillows. ‘Lovely Day’, my favourite feel-good song, is playing on the radio downstairs and with the prospect of six weeks’ holiday in front of me, life feels good.

‘Thanks,’ I say, taking the mug from him. ‘Did you manage to sleep?’

‘Yes, like a log. I’m sorry I couldn’t wait up for you. How was your journey back?’

‘Fine. Lots of thunder and lightning, though. And rain.’

‘Well, at least the sun is back out this morning.’ He nudges me gently. ‘Move over.’ Careful not to spill my tea, I make way for him and he climbs in beside me. He lifts his arm and I settle back into him, my head on his shoulder. ‘A woman has been found dead not far from here,’ he says, so softly that I almost don’t hear him. ‘I just heard it on the news.’

‘That’s awful.’ I put my mug on the bedside table and turn to look at him. ‘When you say not far from here, where do you mean? In Browbury?’

He brushes a strand of hair from my forehead, his fingers soft on my skin. ‘No, nearer than that, somewhere along the road that goes through the woods between here and Castle Wells.’

‘Which road?’

‘You know, Blackwater Lane.’ He bends to kiss me but I pull away from him.

‘Stop it, Matthew.’ I look at him, my heart fluttering behind my ribs like a bird trapped in a cage, waiting for him to smile, to tell me that he knows I came back that way last night and is just teasing. But he only frowns.

‘I know. It’s horrible, isn’t it?’

I stare at him. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Yes.’ He looks genuinely puzzled. ‘I wouldn’t make something like that up.’

‘But...’ I feel suddenly sick. ‘How did she die? Did they give any details?’

He shakes his head. ‘No, just that she was in her car.’

I turn away from him so that he can’t see my face. *It can’t be the same woman*, I tell myself, *it can’t be*.

‘I have to get up,’ I say as his arms come round me again. ‘I need to go shopping.’

‘What for?’

‘Susie’s present. I still haven’t got her anything and it’s her party tonight.’ I swing my legs from the bed and stand up.

‘There’s no hurry, is there?’ he protests. But I’ve already gone, taking my phone with me.

In the bathroom, I lock the door and turn on the shower, wanting to drown out the voice in my head telling me that the woman who’s been found dead is the one that I passed in my car last night. Feeling horribly shaky, I sit down on the edge of the bath and bring up the Internet, looking for news. It’s Breaking News on the BBC but there are no details. All it says is that a woman has been found dead in her car near Browbury in Sussex. Found dead. Does that mean she committed suicide? The thought is appalling.

My mind races, trying to work it out. If it is the same woman, maybe she hadn’t broken down, maybe she had stopped in the lay-by on purpose, because it was isolated, so that she wouldn’t be disturbed. It would explain why

she hadn't flashed her lights, why she hadn't asked for my help – why, when she'd looked back at me through the window, she hadn't made any sign for me to stop, as she surely would have if she'd broken down. My stomach churns with unease. Now, with the sun streaming in through the bathroom window, it seems incredible that I hadn't gone to check on her. If I had, things might have ended differently. She might have told me she was fine, she might have pretended that she'd broken down and that someone was coming to help her. But if she had, I would have offered to wait until they arrived. And if she had insisted I leave, I would have become suspicious, I would have got her to talk to me – and she might still be alive. And wasn't I meant to have told someone about her? But distracted by Rachel's text and the present I was meant to have bought for Susie, I'd forgotten all about the woman in the car.

'Are you going to be long in there, sweetheart?'

Matthew's voice comes through the bathroom door.

'I'll be out in a minute!' I call over the sound of the water running wastefully down the drain.

'I'll make a start on breakfast, then.'

I strip off my pyjamas and get into the shower. The water is hot but not hot enough to wash away the burning guilt I feel. I scrub my body fiercely, trying not to think about the woman unscrewing a bottle of pills and shaking them into her hand, lifting them to her mouth and swallowing them down with water. What horrors had she endured to make her want to take her

life? As she was dying, was there a point when she began to regret what she had done? Hating where my thoughts are going I turn off the water and get out of the shower. The sudden silence is unsettling so I locate the radio on my phone, hoping to hear someone belting out a song full of hope and cheer, anything to stop me from thinking about the woman in the car.

‘... a woman has been found dead in her car in Blackwater Lane in the early hours of the morning. Her death is being treated as suspicious. No further details have been given for the moment but the police are advising people living in the area to be vigilant.’

Shock takes my breath away. *‘Her death is being treated as suspicious’* – The words resonate around the bathroom. Isn’t that what the police say when someone has been murdered? I feel suddenly frightened. I was there, in the same spot. Had the killer been there too, lurking in the bushes, waiting for the opportunity to kill someone? The thought that it could have been me, that I could have been the one to be murdered makes me suddenly dizzy. I grope for the towel rail, forcing myself to take deep breaths. I must have been mad to have gone that way last night.

In the bedroom, I dress quickly in a black-cotton dress, pulling it from a pile of clothes left on the chair. Downstairs, the smell of grilled sausages turns my stomach before I’ve even opened the kitchen door.

‘I thought we’d celebrate the start of your holidays with a slap-up breakfast,’ Matthew says. He looks so

happy that I force a smile onto my face, not wanting to spoil it for him.

‘Lovely.’ I want to tell him about last night, I want to tell him that I could have been murdered, I want to share my horror with him because it seems too big a thing to keep to myself. But if I tell him that I came back through the woods, especially after he specifically told me not to, he’ll be furious. It won’t matter that I’m here, sitting in the kitchen unharmed, not lying murdered in my car. He’ll feel like I do, scared at what could have happened, appalled that I put myself in danger.

‘So what time are you going shopping?’ he asks. He’s wearing a grey T-shirt and thin cotton shorts and, at any other time, I’d be thinking how lucky I was that he was mine. But I can barely look his way. It feels as if my secret is burnt on my skin.

‘As soon as I’ve finished breakfast.’ I look through the window to the back garden, trying to concentrate on how lovely it looks but my mind keeps tripping over last night, over the memory of me driving away. She had been alive at that point, the woman in the car.

‘Is Rachel going with you?’ Matthew interrupts my thoughts.

‘No.’ Suddenly, it seems like the best idea in the world because maybe I could tell her about last night, share the devastation I feel. ‘Actually, that’s a good idea. I’ll phone and ask her.’

‘Don’t be long,’ he says, ‘it’s almost ready.’

‘I’ll only be a minute.’